Censorship and Self-censorship of Colombian Journalists when Addressing Information Related to Local Administrations

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Abstract

This research examines the newsmaking practices followed by local journalists in the Colombian Caribbean Region when covering information related to local administrations. It also explores the practices of communication officials in the Office of the Mayor, focusing on how they inform both citizens and journalists in the region. The data collection method involved semi-structured interviews with sixteen press and television journalists from the Caribbean Region, as well as with three communication professionals in charge of local administrations in Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was performed to identify patterns in the transcripts of these interviews. The topics discussed with journalists included the number of people covering local news in the newsroom; sources of information; criteria for selecting published information, and the presence of censorship or self-censorship in reporting on local management. For the communications professionals in the Offices of the Mayor, the topics covered the mission of their office; criteria for publishing information; channels used for disseminating information to citizens and journalists; the significance of the Transparency and Access to Public Information Law for their office, and the budget allocated for media advertising. The results revealed that censorship and self-censorship occur among journalists when reporting on local administrations, particularly when scrutinizing their management. For those in charge of communication in the respective Offices of the Mayor, the directives from each are definitive in producing information. Both situations prevent citizens from receiving complete, transparent, and good quality information, which is detrimental to democracy.

Keywords

Local journalism, Local administrations, Journalists, Newsmaking practices, Reporting, Colombia, Caribbean Region, Self-censorship, Censorship, Transparency, Press, Television.

1. Introduction

Local journalism is crucial because it informs citizens about what is happening in their immediate surroundings. It becomes even more important when it covers the actions of local leaders, who are elected to represent citizens in decision-making processes that directly affect them.

One of the primary sources for local journalists is the Office of the Mayor, as it is the origin of all information related to local government management. However, a problem arises when the newsmaking practices of journalists and communication officials in the Offices of the Mayor influence the information produced, ultimately affecting what reaches the citizens.

This research examines the newsmaking (**Tuchman**, 1978) practices followed by journalists and communication officials in the cities of Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena –three of the most significant cities in Colombia's Caribbean Region due to their size and economic impact.

While existing research has defined local journalism, emphasizing its critical role due to the immediacy of the issues it addresses and its importance for democracy (**Izquierdo Labella**, 2010; **Fernández del Moral**, 2002), other studies have explored problems of censorship and self-censorship in Colombian journalism (**Barrios; Miller**, 2021; **Hughes** *et al.*, 2017) as well as the influence of government advertising on the dissemination of information about local governments (**Madrid-Malo; Paredes**, 2024). However, the research presented in this article is novel because it specifically analyzes the routines of journalists and the communication officers in the respective Offices of the Mayor in producing information related to local governments.

Additionally, an important fact is that large national media outlets are unable to cover everything that happens in cities or regions that are not local to Bogotá. Although Colombia is "organized as a unitary republic, decentralized with autonomous territorial entities" (Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991, Art. 1), it has been observed that "the more than century-old formula of political centralization and administrative decentralization has been reproduced" (**Morelli; Santofimo**, 1991).

This scenario also impacts the information disseminated by Colombia's major media outlets, as national media often present a generalized portrait of a country that fails to delve into the specific problems of the regions. Local journalism should play a crucial role in addressing these issues, but political and economic dynamics frequently hinder its effectiveness.

With this in mind, the dynamics in which local journalists become involved in producing information, especially regarding local administrations, is a relevant topic of study as it directly affects the information citizens receive. Therefore, this research investigates how journalists from Barranquilla, Santa Marta and Cartagena in the Caribbean Region of Colombia produce the information concerning the Offices of the Mayor of their respective cities.

This investigation is based on nineteen interviews conducted with journalists and former journalists from local media, as well as with those in charge of communications in the mayors' offices in this region of the country. The issues investigated with these journalists include their routines, criteria for publishing, and instances of censorship and self-censorship related to local administrations. Meanwhile, the communication managers of the town halls describe the criteria for publishing information; the channels through which they reach journalists and citizens; the importance they give to the Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information, and the budget to advertise in the media.

> This investigation is based on nineteen interviews conducted with journalists and former journalists from local media, as well as with those in charge of communications in the mayorals' offices in this region of the country

The study found that some media editors/directors exercise censorship, and journalists engage in self-censorship when reporting on information that questions the management of the administrations in charge. Although several journalists felt free to report what they considered relevant, a large number felt the opposite. Thus, it can be inferred that the information published on local media aligns with the suggestions of government actors

"to justify previously stated policies or decisions and, therefore, the media do not fulfill the social function of forming opinion in these cases for the real democratization of the social and political processes of our societies" (**Alzate Zuluaga; Romo Morales**, 2015).

2. Literature Review

Understanding that transparency is not merely a legal requirement but a fundamental citizen right is crucial, as it supports other obligations such as the accountability of public administrations. Adopting the perspective of transparency as communication (**Molina Rodríguez-Navas** *et al.*, 2021), it is seen as a communicative process whereby information is provided to citizens, enabling them to engage in democratic and participatory activities.

At the same time, the information disseminated by government and administrative bodies about their own activities is a fundamental resource for communication professionals. Consequently, it is essential that these sources are reliable.

Journalists must also cross-check this information with other sources to identify potential shortcomings and provide a spectrum of interpretations, critiques, and alternative proposals.

However, the complicity between political and media power can pose an insurmountable obstacle under certain political circumstances. These circumstances, although ostensibly democratic, effectively control the information system, influencing the work of journalists and hindering genuine oversight of governmental institutions.

These ideas will be further developed below.

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3. Local Administrations and Transparency

Public information is defined as information held by a public body or institution, regardless of its format, date of creation, or classification status. Greater access to this information strengthens the foundation for transparent management (**Solimano et al.**, 2008).

Transparency in public management occurs when public entities, in compliance with their functions, generate information that citizens can access in any format (**Giménez-Chornet**, 2012). The Internet has facilitated open access to data in digital and standardized formats that are easy to understand and reuse (**Garriga-Portolà**, 2011; **Ohme**, 2019; **Calvo Gutiérrez**, 2013). Official websites also serve as platforms to deliver useful information to citizens (**Calvo Gutiérrez**, 2013).

The use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) has also reduced publication and distribution costs (**Roberts**, 2006). This reduction has fostered a closer relationship between administrations and citizens (**Borge-Bravo**, 2007) and significantly decreased levels of corruption (**Andersen**, 2009).

Transparency, along with access to public information and citizenry participation, is fundamental in democratic societies (**Bertot et al.**, 2010). Technological advances have compelled administrations to develop tools for engaging with their citizens (**van Ruler**, 2018; **Bertot et al.**, 2012; **Gandía et al.**, 2016). The utilization of this information varies among individuals based on their interests, capabilities, and circumstances (**Aparici; García-Marín**, 2018). Throughout this process, it is vital for local administrations to maintain transparent communication practices with both the media and citizens (**Moreno-Sardà et al.**, 2017).

In Colombia, access to public information is facilitated through the government's online strategy and the enactment of the Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information (*Law 1712*, 2014). Article 2 of this law stipulates that all information held by a regulated entity is public and cannot be withheld or restricted except as provided by constitutional or legal provisions (*Law 1712*, 2014). This law serves as a tool for citizen decision-making and oversight of public administration.

Moreover, *Law 1712* (2014) mandates that the Colombian State should not only respond to information requests, but also provide useful and updated information on its websites and other platforms. This enhances the relationship between the State and its citizens, facilitates the exercise of citizens' rights, and promotes accountability in public administration. Despite the existence of digital spaces and tools designed to make public information accessible, they are not always utilized effectively (**Simelio Solà; Rodríguez-Navas**, 2014). While there is a wealth of information available, its accessibility does not necessarily ensure that it is comprehensible or of high quality (**Manfredi Sánchez et al.**, 2017).

The authors of this study align with scholars such as **Schudson** (2020) and **Bertot et al.** (2010) in recognizing transparency as a fundamental right. While transparency is expected to act as a deterrent against corruption, enhance governance, ensure accountability, and promote participation, it is widely acknowledged that it alone is insufficient (**Etzioni**, 2010; **Worthy**, 2010; **Hernández Bonivento**, 2018). Moreover, transparency is often employed as a strategy in political marketing (**Canel**, 2007; **Sanders et al.**, 2011; **Muñoz Lalinde; Peña Orozco**, 2022).

This practice of selectively publishing information by local administrations also influences journalistic practices, the quality of information received by citizens, and the level of oversight they can exert over public management (**Muñoz Lalinde**, 2020). Access to public information is crucial for democracy (**Dahl**, 2000), as an informed citizenry can participate more consciously in decision-making (**Cid Botteselle et al.**, 2012). Concepts such as open government, open data, e-government, and e-democracy are linked to positive practices that underscore their necessity and utility in the contemporary digital landscape (**Coleman; Blumler**, 2009; **Welch et al.**, 2004; **Moon**, 2002).

"A transparent government is legitimate and efficient; and when it provides prompt responses to its citizens, it embodies a responsible government" (**Veljković et al.**, 2014).

When citizens are well-informed about the actions of their leaders, they not only oversee political decisions but also validate and accept them without resistance (**König**, 2016). This practice fosters trust and social capital while reducing arbitrariness (**Manfredi-Sánchez *et al.***, 2017).

In conclusion, the lack of transparency in local administrations and the actions of local media contribute to the scenario described by **Castells** (2017):

"More than two-thirds of the people on the planet believe that politicians do not represent them, that parties prioritize their interests, that resulting parliaments are not representative, and that governments are corrupt".

4. Local Journalism, Censorship and Self-censorship

There are various ways to restrict the flow of ideas and many facts never become public knowledge or do so long after their occurrence. One of these methods is censorship and secrecy, which intervene at the source of information (**Lippmann**, 2003).

Journalists encounter individuals with vested interests who influence what they report and how they report it. Consequently, journalists are susceptible to bribes, job offers, and other maneuvers that impact their work and the information they handle (**Swain**, 1983). Some media outlets appear willing to accept censorship and self-censorship in exchange for advertising contracts, donations, and bribes (**Robles Rivera**, 2021).

Censorship can take both direct or indirect forms (**Zárate Montealegre**, 2018). It is a strategy employed by elites to control the media and manipulate information (**Stiglitz**, 2017; **Robles Rivera**, 2021), and is also wielded by government press officers. In some cases, journalists themselves succumb to pressure, resulting in self-censorship. Moreover, the advent of technological convergence has exacerbated the ethical crisis in journalism. The closure of media organizations has led to staff reductions and made it challenging to uphold high journalistic standards (**Méndez**, 2016). Similarly, the use of so-called "civic technologies" (**Sánchez Duarte *et al.***, 2015; **Skaržauskienė; Mačiulienė**, 2020), which enable monitoring of public powers, remains aspirational in environments marked by professional risk or personal jeopardy.

Other authors highlight the complicity between media and government through discretionary economic subsidies. According to **Orozco Murillo** (2010),

"what is the most valuable resource that journalists can sell or give in exchange for monetary favors received? The answer is silence, simulation, censorship, self-censorship and the omission of unfavorable or dangerous information for their sponsors" (p. 118).

Government advertising is another important aspect to consider, often termed "a mechanism of indirect censorship" that influences the information published in the media and compromises journalists' independence, thereby violating citizens' right to full information (**Zárate Montealegre**, 2018). This creates a fundamental issue in a society: a free and independent press fosters freedom in opinion formation and political will, ultimately serving as a "guarantee of development and preservation of democracy" (**Dovifat**, 1959).

It is essential to examine the behavior of local media when reporting on state and municipal government management (**Alzate Zuluaga; Romo Morales**, 2015). In some instances, local news may cover public infrastructure inaugurations and political campaigns of public offices (**Aguirre Ochoa; Herrera Torres**, 2021) without following up on the performance of local leaders or demanding accountability –two critical aspects of responsible journalistic practice.

Furthermore, other factors significantly impact journalistic work in various contexts. In regions like Tamaulipas, Mexico, organized crime has infiltrated political systems at all levels and has consequently influenced media content. According to **Cepeda Robledo** (2017),

"the issues of the public sphere are transgressed by the tyranny of organized crime, which censors, places, dictates, threatens and attacks journalism in general" (p. 40).

In Colombia, one in four media outlets across eight conflict-affected regions engage in self-censorship due to fear of reprisals from armed groups or interference by local political powers, as reported by a study by the *Press Freedom Foundation* (**FLIP**, 2014; **Redacción El Tiempo**, 2016).

According to **Carrasco** (2016), self-censorship is

"the omission of topics, sources, or news that should be published, not due to limitations of space, time, or exposure of sources, but in response to some form of pressure".

This practice violates freedom of expression, undermines journalists' credibility, and places their profession, and sometimes their lives, at risk. Journalists resort to self-censorship to safeguard their employment, practice their profession, and avoid jeopardizing advertising revenue from government and private entities that media outlets depend on (**Greene González; Millán**, 2021; **Zárate Montealegre**, 2018). A consequence of this behavior is that society is deprived of critical information (**Yesil**, 2014).

Colombia's National Constitution guarantees minimum freedoms for expression and the establishment of media, emphasizing that "they are free and have social responsibility… There will be no censorship" (*Constitución Política de Colombia*, 1991, Art. 20). Furthermore,

"the mission that falls to a media outlet and journalism in a democracy is not to collaborate with the government; on the contrary, it is to critique any government, at any time in history, and of all forms of power" (**Coronell**, 2011).

Casals Carro (2005) underscores this by stating that journalists not only report current but also explain, question, and help the public form opinions about the reality surrounding them.

The research by **Barrios and Miller** (2021) indicated that Colombian journalists frequently engage in self-censorship and encounter constraints in their reporting. Despite these challenges, they also employ strategies, such as developing digital platforms, to navigate these limitations in traditional media (**Barrios; Miller**, 2021). This study expands on these insights by exploring communicative dynamics between local mayoral offices and the media.

Additionally, **Hughes** *et al.* (2017), in their multinational study covering 62 countries, highlight that journalists working in subnational regions often face heightened vulnerabilities and contend with more intricate and localized tensions compared to their national counterparts. This underscores the importance of examining such issues within the specific context of the Colombian Caribbean.

5. Power and Media

"The class which has the means of material production controls at the same time the means of mental production. Therefore, while they govern as a class and determine the scope and limits of an era, it is evident that they... among other things... regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their time: thus, their ideas are the ruling ideas of their time" (**Marx** & **Engels**, 1938, p. 39 as cited in **Murdock and Golding** (1981)).

The Power Elite asserted that,

"In every town and small city of America an upper set of families stands above the middle classes… they hold the keys to local decisions; their names and faces are often printed in the local papers; in fact, they own the newspapers as well as the radio station" (**Wright Mills**, 1956).

Goffman's (1974) framing theory, described as an "interpretation scheme" facilitating the "locating, perceiving, identifying and labeling" of information, is characterized by **Castells** (2009) as a multi-level process involving the filtering of information by politicians and the media before its disclosure. Similarly, **Castells** (2009) defined **Entman**'s (2004) framing theory as

"the process of selecting and highlighting certain aspects of events and issues and establishing relationships between them to promote a specific interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (p. 218).

This connects with agenda-setting theory, where the media prioritize certain issues while neglecting others (**McCombs; Reynolds**, 2002). **Joseph Severin and Tankard** (1988) add that the press often focuses on topics or pseudo-events dictated by interest groups or specific journalistic practices.

Moreover, the advent of new media technologies alongside declines in advertising and subscription revenues has strengthened the relationships between traditional media, socioeconomic elites, and governments, ensuring their financial viability (**Robles Rivera**, 2021). Financial incentives and media ownership are key strategies in media capture (**Stiglitz**, 2017), especially in Latin America, where advertising is controlled by a small group of public and private entities (**Robles Rivera**, 2021). Consequently, socioeconomic elites acquire media outlets (**Stiglitz**, 2017), enabling them to appoint sympathetic editors and journalists, control headline publication, and exert influence (**Robles Rivera**, 2021).

In Colombia, the media with the largest audiences are owned by a select group of individuals, families, and businessmen who dominate a significant portion of information dissemination (**Levy Bravo** *et al.*, 2023). **Coronell** (2011) asserted that media ownership is concentrated in the hands of just four individuals who determine "the information received by 90% of Colombians" (p. 165). Similarly, in the Caribbean Region, the oldest newspapers are owned by affluent families with direct and indirect ties to local politics (**Muñoz Lalinde**, 2016).

Moreover, **Mejía Quintana** (2011b) postulated a dichotomy between a media subjugated to power that promotes parochial politics and a critical media that fosters pluralism and citizen participation. When the former condition prevails, citizens, along with their political culture, are most affected (**Mejía Quintana**, 2011b). Therefore, the ideal role of the media lies in an impartial and balance management of information, derived from an enlightened audience (**Coronell**, 2011). However, when the media are dominated by power, the audience receives biased information, undermining the concept of information as a societal good (**Mejía Quintana**, 2011a).

McQuail and Desmonts (2000) classified the media into the Dominant Model and the Pluralist Model. In the Dominant Model, the media are subordinate to other institutions and have a narrow range of interests, limiting critical engagement by the audience. Conversely, the Pluralist Model emphasizes diversity in information sources. Similarly, **Behrend** (2011) described

"'closed games' as subnational political regimes where a family or a small group of families dominates provincial politics, controls access to top government positions, the provincial resources, media outlets, and business opportunities" (p. 153).

Leaders of subnational authoritarian regimes often employ tactics to control borders to enhance local political control and reduce external intervention (**Gibson**, 2006). One strategy involves controlling "the information disseminated by local media" (**Gibson**, 2006). Subnational actors thus become pivotal mediators between the media, audience, and political affairs (**Durazo Herrmann**, 2017). Additionally, **Espino Sánchez** (2016) argued

"that in Mexico democracy has been installed at the federal level, however, this has not happened successfully at the subnational level… [this is because] state leaders have managed to gain power in the national sphere but have lost counterweights at the local level during the period of political transition" (p. 91).

Furthermore, other authors discuss the media's impact on the political system (**Luhmann**, 2000), while **Martín-Barbero** (1987) contends that understanding what is popular in culture requires accounting for the public's connection with politics.

6. Objectives

To understand how journalists in Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena prepare information concerning their respective city halls.

To determine whether there are instances of censorship and self-censorship in the print and broadcast media of Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena regarding news related to the city halls.

To understand the methods employed by communication professionals in the press offices of Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena city halls when disseminating information to regional media outlets.

7. Method

Due to the complexity of the population analyzed, this study applied purposive sampling. This method is used when the researcher consciously selects participants based on specific qualities they possess (**Etikan** *et al.*, 2016). In purposive sampling, the "characteristics are defined for a purpose that is relevant for the study" (**Andrade**, 2021). Thus, it is a non-randomized method that does not require support from basic theories or a specific number of participants (**Etikan** *et al.*, 2016).

Specifically, an intentional homogeneous sample was established, meaning a sample where candidates share specific characteristics, which are deliberately limited by the end of the study (**Andrade**, 2021; **Etikan** *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, two samples were created based on the roles and positions of the participants: the criteria for the first sample consisted of journalists from the local media sections of newspapers and television news outlets in Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena, while the criteria for the second sample comprised the heads of communications offices in these cities.

To assemble the first sample, 20 journalists, editors, and former directors, who were currently or had recently been employed in the local media section of newspapers and television news outlets in Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena, were contacted. Of these, 16 media professionals agreed to participate in an interview. For the second sample, the heads of the press or communications offices from the town halls of the aforementioned cities were contacted directly, and all three consented to be interviewed.

Once the samples were established, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the data collection technique. These interviews serve as a middle ground between unstructured –conversational– and structured –survey– formats (**Leech**, 2002). In semi-structured interviews, researchers pose questions to gather firsthand information on a topic (**Brown; Danaher**, 2019). This format also allows researchers to ask "presumption" questions, where they already anticipate part of the answer, in a less intimidating manner, thus eliciting honest responses from the interviewees (**Leech**, 2002).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews permit the inclusion of grand tour questions (**Spradley**, 1979), where interviewees provide detailed insights on topics they are well-versed in **Leech** (2002). Although semi-structured interviews are planned in advance, they also allow for spontaneity and improvisation during the interview to ensure comprehensive data collection (**Wengraf**, 2001).

Finally, **Breakwell** *et al.* (2012) recommended against taking notes during interviews and advocated for the use of recording devices for accuracy. Therefore, all interviews in this study were audio-recorded.

Most of the interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face, although in two cases, they were conducted in pairs due to the busy schedules of the interviewees and for their convenience. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and all were recorded.

An agreement was established with the journalists: they agreed to participate in the interviews under the condition that their identities would be protected. Therefore, the lead researcher and the journalists signed a document in which the researcher pledged not to disclose any identifying information about them and to provide them with the results of the study. As a result, the affiliations of the journalists will not be mentioned.

The variables analyzed in these interviews were:

- Number of journalists working in the local section of media outlets, encompassing newspapers and television news.
- Methods used in producing information related to the local administration.
- Criteria applied in selecting information for publication.
- Instance of censorship and self-censorship when dealing with information that critiques the local administration.

Regarding the respective heads of the press office or communications office of the cities' town halls, three interviews were conducted with: The Secretary of Communications of Barranquilla's Office of the Mayor, the head of Strategic Communications of Santa Marta's Office of the Mayor, and the Head of Communications of Cartagena's Office of the Mayor.

The variables analyzed in these cases were:

- Number of personnel and roles within their team.
- Mission of the office or secretary.
- Criteria for information publication.
- Effective methods for engaging citizens.
- Effective methods for engaging journalists.
- Importance of the Transparency and Access to Public Information Law.
- Advertising budget allocated for local media.

The lead researcher also signed and provided a document to each of the heads of the press or communications offices where the commitment was to share the results of this research with them.

Once all the interviews were recorded, the audio recordings were transcribed using Trint, an Artificial Intelligence audio transcription software. These transcriptions were then refined with the assistance of three volunteer researchers who also signed a confidentiality agreement. Following this, a thematic analysis was conducted.

"Thematic analysis remains the most useful method for capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set. It is also the most widely used method of analysis in qualitative research" (**Guest *et al.***, 2012).

Furthermore, this method ensures accurate and high-quality analysis (**Clarke; Braun**, 2017).

This technique involves "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data" (**Braun; Clarke**, 2006). Themes emerge as the researcher identifies implicit and explicit ideas (**Guest *et al.***, 2012). Therefore, recurring themes surface from the data across a specific number of interviews (**Braun; Clarke**, 2006). Subsequently, each of the 19 interview transcripts from the two samples underwent three thorough readings. As **Neuendorf** (2019) emphasized, these meticulous readings facilitate the inductive emergence of themes.

The resulting themes from both samples –journalists and heads of communications offices– were coded using Atlas.ti, a data analysis software. The researcher established codes to represent the identified ideas (**Guest *et al.***, 2012). These codes, annotated as words or sentences, encapsulate essential attributes (**Saldaña**, 2016).

After the lead researcher completed the initial coding, it was reviewed and refined by the other two researchers. Once the codes were clearly defined and collectively analyzed by the research team, the findings were compiled into a report.

8. Results

To protect the identity of the journalists, this section of the study will refer to them as "Journalist" followed by a number (for example, Journalist 1). Similarly, the heads of communication from the different town halls will be identified as "Head of Communication" followed by a number (for example, Head of Communication 1). Additionally, the names of cities, media companies, other journalists, press secretaries, and public officials will not appear in any citation or quote; they will be referred to as city, district, media company, journalist, press secretary, mayor, and public official.

8.1. Journalists

Number of Journalists

The number of journalists responsible for covering local information and information related to the local administration varies depending on the media company and its organizational structure. The team size dedicated to covering local information ranges from one to seven people.

Nearly half of the journalists indicated that only one person is responsible for covering information related to the local administration or the Office of the Mayor of their city. For instance, one journalist stated:

In the media company I work for, each one is responsible for a page... we are not only journalists here, we are editors, so there are several journalists and each one is in charge of a page... I take care of everything that is related to the local administration (Journalist 14).

Another journalist mentioned, "There is only one journalist who covers the district [Office of the Mayor]" (Journalist 5). While another journalist said:

There is a journalist who handles information related to the Office of the Mayor. But it depends on the situation, because there may be a person who covers economic issues who also compiles information from other sections because the situation forced him to, or there may be a Mayor's event that has an economic nature and that journalist ends up covering that event (Journalist 4).

In contrast, others mentioned that teams of up to seven people were dedicated exclusively to covering local information, including matters related to the Office of the Mayor. For example, one journalist stated, "The team of journalists that made up the Local section was six to seven journalists. When I took on the role of Local editor, there was already a journalist who had been working with that source for a while" (Journalist 7). Another mentioned, "In the Local section, I think there were about eight including the intern" (Journalist 11).

On the other hand, some journalists noted that there are typically two professionals responsible for covering information related to the local administration. "In the Local section there are two journalists; I am one of them... I am responsible for what comes out of the Office of the Mayor and some city secretaries" (Journalist 15). Finally, only one journalist said that the team responsible for covering both local news and administration-related information consisted of three people.

Process of Information Production

The sources of information for what is published by the local media range from press releases issued by the mayors' press offices to what is published in other media, as well as topics that are part of the journalistic teams' agendas.

Most journalists stated that to produce information, they rely on press releases from local administrations and on issues from their own agendas that arise during editorial board meetings. "The topics were a mixture of the government agenda and a portion of our own topics" (Journalist 7). "Most of the information is original content. Each journalist is responsible for proposing topics. We also cover current issues from the Office of the Mayor" (Journalist 8). "We arrive at the editorial board meeting in the morning, around 8:30. We propose three topics, and if we're lucky, one gets approved. We always try to make a difference, so it's challenging to find a topic and persuade my boss. There is a lot of debate; he always asks us to have a unique approach. Once he accepts it, we start discussing how to manage the information" (Journalist 6).

Finally, a few journalists mentioned that they gather information based on press releases from local administrations, news heard on the radio, and their own initiatives. For example, one journalist explained, "We listen to the radio because it is the medium that gets information early or speaks with official sources. Sometimes we also pursue our own stories. The director [of the media outlet] gathers all the journalists early to discuss which stories we plan to pursue" (Journalist 4).

Information Selection Criteria

Almost half of the journalists stated that the information published is agreed upon between the journalists and the heads of the media, ranging from section editors to media directors, depending on the organization of each media company. "The Locals section was called to present about five proposals that had to be related to what they were discussing on a day-to-day basis, but also if there was news other media had released and we didn't have it. I would come to the editorial board with some proposals. In addition to this, the director came up with some proposals" (Journalist 10). "Let's say that it is what the director of the news program dictates, and if, for example, he dictates three themes, three themes are developed. I do three topics, but I propose three more. That is more how I like to approach my work" (Journalist 15).

In contrast, almost half of the journalists emphasized that their boss is the one who decides the content that is published and the focus that is given to the information. "The director is the one who decides all the content and time schedules" (Journalist 2). "One of the things that affected us the most were the changes that occurred before the closing [of the issue] because that disrupted the production, and that occurred because many times the director was not at those meetings [editorial boards] and he arrived later to make changes" (Journalist 7).

Finally, a few journalists stated that they are the ones who decide the content, space, and focus of the information published in the media they work for. "What you do is well done, as long as it is true, as long as it is truthful, and that every side of the story is included whenever you are going to publish information. That is our job, that is our ethics" (Journalist 16). "Each one is responsible for a page; we are not only journalists here, we are editors" (Journalist 13).

Censorship

More than half of the journalists interviewed stated that they had experienced censorship. This censorship can stem from various sources such as supervisors, editors, or be influenced by advertising concerns within media companies, or due to the close relationships between media owners and local administrations.

Some journalists affirmed that censorship came directly from the source: "The press secretary at that time was tough because he [the mayor] also faced a wave of criticism. So, the press secretary did not provide any content and banned some media outlets and journalists from here" (Journalist 8). Another journalist explained:

Sometimes, we approach the Comptroller's Office, the Attorney General's Office, and anyone who tries to find information related to the Office of the Mayor has difficulties doing so. You find answers like 'the information you are looking for is relevant, you can find it in that office of the Office of the Mayor', and when you approached the indicated office no one gave you anything and if they answered you, they would give you evasive answers. (Journalist 10).

In one particular case, a journalist received verbal threats for covering information that questioned the local administration:

They sent me a message through an administration official, then that person told me: 'I don't want anything to happen to you', so, first the press officer of that official told me, and then because I continued with the investigation, he himself told me to go to his office, and when I went there he told me that, please, they had already sent someone to say stay quiet. (Journalist 6).

Finally, a few journalists highlighted that censorship often originates directly from the director or chief editor of the media company. This censorship can be influenced by the advertising revenue received from the local administration or due to the close relationships between the media owners and the local government. One journalist explained:

There were questions on the part of the director when there was information that was unfavorable to the Office of the Mayor, but when the information was favorable there were no such inquiries. This phenomenon is caused by the relationship between the media owners and the Office of the Mayor (Journalist 7).

Self-Censorship

Almost half of the journalists admitted to practicing self-censorship when covering information related to the local administration. They cited several reasons for this self-censorship: concerns that the information might challenge the mayor, potential repercussions from the outlet's owners regarding advertising revenue, and fear that negative reports could harm citizens.

A group of journalists expressed a reluctance to jeopardize their jobs or create difficulties for their media outlet. "He [the media director] doesn't censor, but if something upsets him, I don't waste much energy because I know that they won't let me publish it anyway, or they'll confront me if that happens" (Journalist 4). "There are some topics which I wanted to do and that I discussed, but that I never insisted on doing because I already knew that, in the end, it would be problematic" (Journalist 11). "I think many journalists are afraid to question the mayor's management due to the power he wields" (Journalist 14). Another journalist added, "I wanted to do a piece on the concentration of contracts, that is, who benefited the most from contracts with the local administration. We never pursued that story simply due to self-censorship" (Journalist 11).

On the other hand, more than half of the journalists stated that they do not practice self-censorship and feel free to question the actions of the local administration. "They have never told us we can't bring up a topic. The most they can say is to try to ask the other party" (Journalist 8). "When I see that the investigation does not put my life at risk, I do it" (Journalist 6). "I have no problem being independent, saying that things are good or bad, as long as it is real and demonstrable that things are the way they are" (Journalist 17).

8.2. Heads of Communication and/or Press Secretaries

Staff size

One of the Heads of Communications (HC) mentioned that their team consisted of nineteen people, another reported having thirty-four people, while the third said around two hundred people could be involved in their communication routines.

The first HC likened their office to a local media company, comprising five journalists. "I had nineteen people: five journalists, four photographers, two audiovisual producers, and the rest were administrative staff. That was my team, plus two people for social media".

The second HC compared their office to a press agency that disseminates institutional information through official channels:

We have a group of thirty-four people. The work methodology is like a press agency. The mayor's coverage is managed by five people: a community manager, a cameraman, a photographer, a journalist, and me. When there is an external workday, a videographer joins us. The rest of the team produces a television program that we post on YouTube and supports the various offices within the town hall (Head of Communication 2).

The third HC included both full-time and part-time workers. The full-time group consists of five areas, one of which directly interacts with all media, including local ones:

There are five heads: the head of the Brand Unit of the Secretary, the Head of Informative Communication or External Media (who is most related to journalism), the Director of the Internal Communication Unit, a person responsible for being the 'filter' for the Digital Team of the Office of the Mayor, and the Press Officer, who handles daily reporting for the mayor (Head of Communication 3).

Additionally, this HC stated:

We are talking about more than two hundred people. These include logistics staff, drivers, secretaries, cameramen, reporters, community managers, and editors. No Secretary has a head of communication anymore; instead, there are people assigned to communications tasks, but we call them liaisons (Head of Communication 3).

Mission of the Office or Secretary

The three Heads of Communications (HCs) stated that the mission of their office is to inform citizens about the actions of the local administration. One HC added that they also manage internal communication within the town hall.

"The mission of the Press Office is to report on matters that concern the community and to communicate government actions daily through bulletins. We manage a quite hectic schedule. We report everything because this is an open-doors government" (Head of Communication 1).

The second HC emphasized that their mission is to communicate with both internal (employees of the Office of the Mayor) and external (citizens) audiences regarding administrative management:

Our mission was to handle the communication processes, both external and internal, reaching our primary information niche, which is the people who work in the town hall, as well as to the great bulk of citizens who want to know about the mayor's activities (Head of Communication 2).

The third HC mentioned that their mission is to be a bridge between the public administration and the citizenry, giving prominence to citizens' voices. "Our mission is to be the bridge between the citizenry and the public administration. We are permanent listeners of the community, aiming to read, interpret, and comprehend their information needs".

Criteria for Publishing Information

Two of the HCs emphasized that the information published is aligned with the mayor's guidelines. Another HC stated that the information follows the Development Plan of the territorial entity, in this case, the district.

Two HCs mentioned that the mayor controls what is published. "I decide what is published, but I am in constant communication with the mayor" (Head of Communication 1). "[When] there is a key issue here, there are some guidelines that the Head of Communication gives about what is wanted; those guidelines are given by the mayor" (Head of Communication 2).

The other HC also mentioned that priority is given to issues based on their relationship with the city's Development Plan. "The issues come from a dynamic that each dependency has. The liaison [of each dependency] proposes the topics and we propose how to adjust it to the mayor's speech, to the Development Plan that is being executed" (Head of Communication 3).

Mechanisms to Reach the Citizenry

The mechanisms to reach the citizenry include analogue media (radio and printed press), social media, online video platforms, and the web pages of local administrations. The use of digital marketing strategies, such as BTL (Below the Line) activations and publications in recognized media to position the city brand, was also mentioned.

"We have a printed newspaper, YouTube, social media, a website, and a radio program," stated Head of Communication 1. Head of Communication 2 added, "Colombia is a radio country. The printed press is also effective, but the internet and social media have played a very important role".

Head of Communication 3 also highlighted strategies related to digital marketing in networks: "Social media, press releases, BTL activations, meetings with the community, sectoral accountability, which we have been doing since last year; the campaigns that we carry out permanently, [for instance] advertising campaigns".

Mechanisms to Reach Journalists

The use of social media, WhatsApp, and email predominates: social media for its immediacy and direct interaction with journalists; email for the official character it gives to the press bulletins of the Communication Offices of the town halls. Head of Communication 1's statement of communicating "via email and WhatsApp" supports this pattern.

Another Head of Communication joined existing WhatsApp groups:

I created a mailing list via WhatsApp. I didn't create a group; I joined three groups. What we did was, for example, I had five journalists sending the same information. When things were very urgent, we would call the journalists. When they arrived at the Town Hall, we would talk to them to provide context. On some occasions, we would give them a written press release, and other times, the mayor would talk (Head of Communication 2).

Similarly, the third HC also used email and WhatsApp:

Public news is formatted as an official press release that we send out. We have a database of 565 emails. This distribution platform has the institutional image so that the media know it is an official source of the Office of the Mayor. We also send a statement when clarifying a specific topic. WhatsApp is used when there is something urgent on the public agenda. I send messages from my cell phone to a broadcast list of media directors (Head of Communication 3).

Importance of Transparency and Access to Public Information Law

All of the HCs assured the investigators that they work in compliance with the Transparency and Public Information Law, publishing public information on official web pages and other institutional media. "We try to fully comply with the products that I mentioned [the newspaper and other media]" (Head of Communication 1).

Although they stated they work to comply with this law, one HC acknowledged the outdatedness of the town hall's website:

Our website was outdated. When we started in the middle of 2017, we revamped it and finished at the beginning of 2018. It ended up being one of the best websites in the country. It has a customer service chat, displays the city's investments, and shows how much of the development plan we are achieving (Head of Communication 2).

Head of Communication 3 added:

The entire webpage, in addition to being designed for the citizens, is based on *Law 1712* and the minimum content we have to publish. What we, from the Secretary of Communications, do is control and follow up on this publication scheme.

Media Advertising Budget

In one case, the advertising is focused on local, national, and international media. In another case, the Head of Communication stated that there was no budget for media advertising. "I don't have money to pay for advertising in the media; I don't have money for advertising brochures [inserts in newspapers]" (Head of Communication 1).

Another HC mentioned a general budget of $61,000 USD per year with additional funds of $15,000 USD for special publications. This was because the unit is an office and not a secretary. "I didn't have a gigantic advertising budget. A lot of the resources went to Provisional Service Agreements (PSAs). I had a publishing budget of $61,000 USD annually. Occasionally, an additional $15,000 USD was allocated for special publications" (Head of Communication 2).

In one case, the budget exceeded $2.7 million USD annually and was invested in local, national, and international media. "We have large media expenditures, and in large media, it can be about $1.83 million USD a year. But in total, we could be talking about $2.44 million to $2.74 million USD a year" (Head of Communication 3).

9. Discussion and Conclusions

The methodology and sample of this study yielded valuable insights into the production routines of professionals working in town hall press offices and regional media. Therefore, we can draw conclusions on the central theme of this work: the existence of censorship and/or self-censorship in the local, political information delivered to citizens through the written press and television in Colombia's Caribbean Region.

Building on previous research by **Barrios and Miller** (2021) and **Hughes *et al.*** (2017), this study focuses on local and regional dynamics. It explores the relationship between the communicative efforts of mayors' communication offices and the media, analyzing the interplay between the communication needs of political officials and the responsibilities of journalists who monitor these officials. This ensures that citizens receive comprehensive and reliable information necessary for informed decision-making, deliberation, and participation in democracy. In line with **Casals Carro** (2005), the media's role in shaping public opinion is emphasized.

Press releases from town halls are fundamental sources of information for preparing news to be published in local media. As **Borge-Bravo** (2007) noted, digital technologies have facilitated interactions between political institutions and the public. However,

> Press releases from town halls are fundamental sources of information for preparing news to be published in local media

the media's reliance on these sources becomes problematic when the information is reproduced without critical analysis. This situation, highlighted by **Muñoz Lalinde and Peña Orozco** (2022) in their discussion on the application of transparency legislation, turns the media into instruments of political marketing.

Interviews with the Heads of Communication reveal that they lead large teams primarily focused on informing the public about the actions of the local administration. In contrast, almost half of the journalists interviewed said there is only one journalist covering local information. This suggests that more media and journalism jobs are being created in the communication offices of the mayors than in local media.

On the other hand, it is mostly the mayor who sets guidelines and controls what is published. Conversely, media heads are the ones who largely decide or approve the topics to be discussed and published. Furthermore, almost half of local media journalists reported experiencing censorship.

Three factors contribute to this practice: the sources themselves, the directors or editors of the media, and advertising interests, particularly related to institutional advertising from the town halls. In some cases, threats have been made. Consequently, almost half of the journalists in the media claim to self-censor on issues related to local administration, especially when questioning the mayor. They justify this practice as necessary to keep their jobs or to prevent economic problems for the media company if institutional advertising is withdrawn.

> Almost half of local media journalists reported experiencing censorship

Although the majority said they did not apply self-censorship, it has been revealed that the limit to freely exercising journalism is risking their lives. As highlighted by **Robles Rivera** (2021) and **Carrasco** (2016), there is an acceptance of constraints on freedom of information due to the perceived need to secure benefits crucial for sustaining media operations and employment. This phenomenon represents a form of indirect censorship, as described by **Zárate Montealegre** (2018).

Consequently, although the advertising budget of town halls in the media is sometimes not high, local media are fragile and fearful of losing this income, generating economic dependency. This aligns with the findings of **Orozco Murillo** (2010) and **Robles Rivera** (2021), which suggest adherence to official guidelines (**Aguirre Ochoa; Herrera Torres**, 2021; **Zárate Montealegre**, 2018).

Furthermore, the physical integrity and job security of journalists condition their professional activity, leading to self-censorship (**Yesil**, 2014; **Zárate Montealegre**, 2018). As a result, local media in the Caribbean Region do not fully comply with their democratic mission of freely informing citizens, enabling them to express opinions and make political decisions (**Mejía Quintana**, 2011b). This is particularly problematic given the relationship between media ownership by economic elites and the policies dictated in the region (**Muñoz Lalinde**, 2016).

The conclusions of this work should be reviewed in light of political events in Colombia and the region, as well as transformations in the media landscape. Therefore, it will be interesting to verify the persistence and changes in the identified problems and described dynamics in the future. Additionally, it is worth expanding this work to consider how professionals use social media and other platforms to determine to what extent the phenomena of censorship and self-censorship in the press and television can be counteracted by other professional practices. Future studies should also include radio newsmaking practices, considering that radio continues to be one of the most listened-to media in the Colombian Caribbean Region, as both journalists and Heads of Communication have highlighted its importance.

It should be noted that those in charge of institutional communication claim to achieve high transparency levels. However, this assertion can be viewed through communicative perspectives that either favor citizen political participation or adhere strictly to legal or administrative requirements. The latter perspective contributes very little to fostering relations between administrations and the citizenry. Thus, future studies should delve deeper into how town halls genuinely apply transparency principles and attributes that strengthen the democratic system, allowing private media to effectively monitor and control local government actions (**Molina-Rodríguez-Navas; Muñoz Lalinde**, 2021).

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